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CARAVAGGIO – THE ULTIMATE CARDSHARP

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Abstract: A study on the allegorical devices encoded by Caravaggio in *The Cardsharps* (Kimbell Art Museum).
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Rightly recognized for his exceptional technical skills, Caravaggio was also one of the great masters in the art of crafting ambiguities and constructing elaborate narratives[1]. This versatile concept guided the design of a canvas painted around 1596 and currently displayed in the United States, under the title *The Cardsharps*.

Caravaggio, *The Cardsharps*, Kimbell Art Museum (AP198706), [wikimedia.org/Google Art Project].

1 Regarding Caravaggio's allegorical devices, see the research collected in *Italian-crafted. Studies 2012-2016* [archive.org].

Decades earlier, Niccolò Machiavelli lamented that the divided and discordant Italians became accustomed to conspiracies, traps and backstabbing. He added that to survive, one had to prevail, which required caution, planning, anticipation, timing, cynicism...

Such a strategy facilitated control over enemies, also improving the chances of success with the ever-capricious "Fortuna", i.e. any unexpected and random events. This ominous context, where everyone distrusted everyone else, persisted throughout the 16th century and was very much present during the life of Caravaggio (1571-1610), who expressed it in the aforementioned painting.

The scene is well known in historiography: in that card game, a naive young man is deceived by two individuals, one of whom peeks at his cards to signal to his accomplice[2].

It is a technically brilliant composition, but seemingly somewhat simplistic from a narrative point of view, presenting obvious allusions to the dangers lurking on all sides. For example, Bosch had also issued such warnings[3], but for Caravaggio the solution was not to abandon the "game".

Thus, upon closer observation, it becomes clear that the piece conceived by Caravaggio is more complex. In a recent contribution, Jürgen Müller proposed that the supposedly naive individual might have been hiding cards behind his back, something the older individual had just discovered. In other words, the deceived one was also a deceiver[4].

This line of reasoning seems correct, and the multi-layered painting can also be further interpreted as follows: the cautious "naive" young man had placed an accessory/amulet in his hat, first hypnotizing and disorienting the older individual, leading him to send the wrong signals to his accomplice.

When the latter realized that they were somehow being deceived, he tried to pull out his dagger, but also hypnotized and confused, he pulled out one of his hidden cards (as if stabbing himself).

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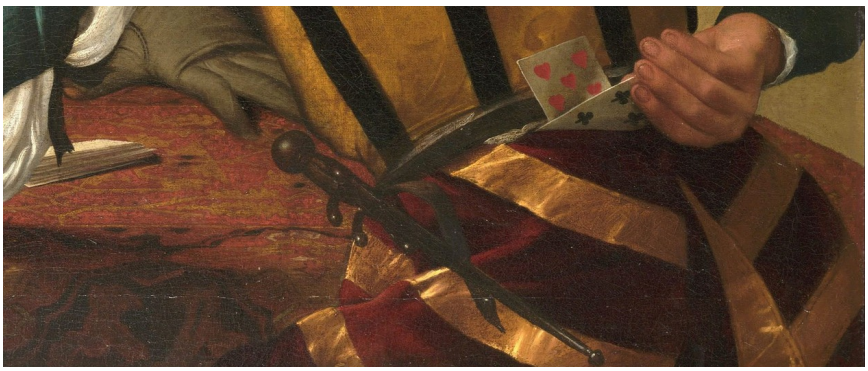

2 For a general contextualization and characterization of this and other compositions with card games, see the studies of: Giacomo BERRA, “Le incisioni raffiguranti giocatori di carte o di backgammon e i Bari del Caravaggio”, in *Il giuoco al tempo di Caravaggio dipinti, giochi, testimonianze dalla fine del ’500 ai primi del ’700*, 2013 [online]; and Gail FEIGENBAUM, “Perfectly True, Perfectly False: Cardsharps and Fortune Tellers by Caravaggio and La Tour” in *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions*, 2014 [online].

3 See *The Pedlar* by Jheronimus Bosch (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam); regarding this painting see chapter “O eterno errante” in *Jheronimus Bosch – o relojoeiro dos símbolos*, pp.281, as well as pp.86, 119, 213, 227, 237, 247.

4 Jürgen MÜLLER, “Betrogene Betrüger. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggios 'Die Falschspieler' als Metamalerei” [in *Kunstchronik*, 73, 2020; online].

As already exemplified regarding the *Portrait of Alof of Wignacourt* (Louvre), Caravaggio was a specialist in this type of figurative deconstruction[5].

To recap, in *The Carsharps* that trickstery played by the "lamb" himself symbolizes the anticipatory calculation and countermeasures that allowed the target individual not only to survive but also to triumph in a highly predatory environment.

And to conclude with an ironic biographical remark, it should be noted that when the painter was beginning to triumph in the artistic world, his impetuous and problematic personality (to say the least) led him to lose the delicate and precarious reins with which he tried to control Fortuna, which thus turned against the great master of Baroque painting.

5 See *Deconstructing Caravaggio and Velázquez* [academia.edu].